

GOD AT WORK

What God can accomplish despite difficult circumstances

Acts 12

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The account of Peter's imprisonment under King Herod and his subsequent release through an

angel of the Lord (Acts 12) is not only a dramatic example of what God can do in the life of a Christian, but also a powerful example of what He can do in the life of a non-Christian as well. Cast into prison along with James for his unswerving witness for Christ, Peter now became the prime target of Herod whose hope was to quash this new movement of faith. Herod promptly executed James with the sword--a fulfillment of the very words of Christ that he would indeed drink of the same cup from which the Lord drank (Matt. 20:22-23). Then, seeing that his harassment of the Church pleased the Jews and that it could work to his political advantage, he then made plans to execute Peter as soon as the Passover celebration was finished. It is ironic that there can be such a meticulous adherence to religious law while at the same time persecuting God's true servants, yet it underscores the truth of the Lord's words when he said in John 16:2-3, "...yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father; nor Me." Christians should not be surprised when persecution comes; it issues out of intense hatred for God. It is also interesting to note how God allowed James, one of his choice servants to suffer martyrdom while on the other hand, He allowed Peter to carry on. Why God allows events to happen as they do is indeed an enigma to us—at least for now until that Day comes when we shall know "*even as we are also known*" (1 Cor. 13:12). Regardless, the work of God marches forward despite its apparent setbacks.

While in prison, Peter and guarded by four prevented his release. night before he was to be asleep! How could this sleeping when his One reason might have constant prayer was the Church (v. 5). If so, believers (both corporately) should be another, especially adversity. Little do we that *our* fervent prayer for others will have upon *their* hearts and minds, and vice versa. The fact that *many* were gathered together for prayer (v. 12) certainly contributed to Peter's rest and ultimate release, but is also a sad rebuke to this present generation.



The Apostle Peter being released by an angel

was bound with chains squads of soldiers who But amazingly on the executed, he was fast be? How could Peter be execution was so near? been due to the fact that offered on his behalf by it is a clear reminder that individually and interceding for one during times of realize the private effect

Perhaps Peter was sleeping because he was acting upon Scripture, which promises perfect peace to those whose mind is stayed upon the Lord (Isaiah 26:3). In effect, he could have been doing exactly what the apostle Paul would later urge the Philippian believers to do: to make their requests known unto God in order to have the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7). After all, the words of Christ were probably still fresh in his mind when He prophesied to him just weeks before that he would not die until he was old (John 21:18). This could have easily given Peter the confidence that he had many years to live and that the Lord would surely intervene before daybreak. Whatever the reason, Peter sleeping in prison during his imprisonment and imminent execution is a superb example of trusting in the promises of God and a pertinent reminder to all of us of our need to wait upon the Lord and rest quietly in Him despite the despairing circumstances that may surround us.

But not only are the events of Acts 12, a lesson of trust in the midst of difficulty, it is also a lesson of God opening doors in response to prayer and clearing the way through seemingly impossible barriers, despite our doubt and unbelief. When Peter was at the extremity of his circumstances, God was just beginning to work. It has been well-stated: *“God moves behind the scenes and moves the scenes that He’s behind”*-- and move the scenes He did. When the time was right, when all hope was gone and when circumstances looked the bleakest, that was the time when chains started dropping and doors started opening. An angel dispatched from heaven exhorted Peter to arise quickly and to follow him. To delay would have complicated matters, to say the least. But Peter moved promptly through the door that God had opened. Only God can cause fetters to fall and doors to open--it is up to us to do the rest, acting quickly and obediently. In our walk with the Lord, there may be times when our backs are against the wall and the only deliverance from our situation will be when in His time He clears a prescribed path that must walk in without delay.

Further miracles ensued as the iron gate that led to the city opened of its own accord. Peter could hardly believe what was happening (v. 9) and neither will we when God begins to work! And where was Peter being directed? He was being led to meet with the Lord’s people – to the place where they were gathered together, praying diligently for his release. At first, they too could hardly believe what God had done (vv. 14-15), but Peter kept on knocking, undeterred by the spiritual sluggishness of these “unbelieving believers”! How is it that God’s people so often require extra convincing when He is so clearly working? But thankfully there are those who even though they stand alone are nevertheless persistent and persuasive in acknowledging and declaring the powerful work that God can do. What a challenge to us who so easily accept our difficult circumstances as they are and fail to “step out” of our difficult surroundings to follow the Lord by faith as a testimony to His people. George Mueller did in a previous generation and so can we.

But apart from the practical lessons that this episode in Peter’s experience provides the Christian, there is another equally powerful lesson that this portion contains in the Gospel. It offers tremendous encouragement to us as we pray for the salvation of our acquaintances, friends, and loved ones who are spiritually bound and held in the grip of sin. It portrays the way in which light of Christ can overcome sin’s darkness to free a person from their spiritual imprisonment, direct their steps to a fellowship of genuine believers and enable them to testify of the power of God to save. To be sure, Peter was an ardent follower of Lord Jesus; but the process by which he was miraculously delivered from Herod’s grip aptly depicts the power of Christ to save. Peter was under the sentence of death, imprisoned, bound by chains, and watched over continually by four sets of guards. It seemed as if there was no way possible that he would ever be freed from his hopeless predicament. Yet there was – through One sent from Heaven with Light of God. That Light, which illumined Peter’s darkened dungeon (yet strangely remained unnoticed by all the other prisoners and guards) is the same Light that even today shines in

hearts “to give the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). It exposes a person’s ominous surroundings, stirs them out of their slumber and brightens their path, causing them to immediately arise and leave their desperate situation to join in the fellowship of His people. Charles Wesley captured it well in his immortal hymn “*And Can It Be*”:

*“Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”*

Even God’s people may not believe at first, as was the case with Saul of Tarsus when news of his conversion came to the Lord’s people (Acts 9:21). But in time, the persistent testimony of genuine conversion will prevail. Not only will a new Christian prove his faith by his actions, but he will prove it by his words also. “*Let the redeemed of the LORD say so*” (Ps. 107.2). So fellow Christian, don’t despair! Keep praying for that friend, that neighbor, that family member who seems so unreachable and whose circumstances seem so impenetrable. Your constant, fervent prayer for them in time could make all the difference in their lives.

Yes, there are many Gospel parallels in this passage as well as practical reminders also for younger and older believers alike. It helps us to see that God allows some believers like James to suffer when others are spared; how the Church needs to be in constant prayer and dependence upon the Lord, especially in times of adversity; how we need to acknowledge that God can and does respond to the prayer of His people as they call upon Him, and at times if need be, we may have to be persistent and tenacious in our testimony for Him. But just as important, it shows us (and encourages us) that He is able to release a person from the shackles of sin to walk out from underneath the sentence of death to boldly proclaim that God is at work against all odds.

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